

INTRODUCTION TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

HOW DO WE GET THE OLD TESTAMENT?

The Old Testament is a library of 39 books written over a period of about 1,500 years. It contains different types of literature, anthologies of songs, poetry, proverbs, prophecy, etc. - we are going to concentrate on the historical books. It was originally written in Hebrew - the **Masoretic** text. However by the 3rd century BC the Jews were spread throughout the Greek Empire and so it was decided to make a Greek translation of the text. Scribes in Alexandria in Egypt translated the OT into Greek - the **Septuagint**. It was this Greek translation which was quoted by the authors of the New Testament. However bear in mind that doesn't mean the Old Testament was complete in one document as we have today. There were no techniques available to bind such a large collection of literature into one single volume.

Alphabetic scripts were invented about 1600 BC, making writing much more simple and widespread than the picture like Egyptian hieroglyphics. This is the time in between Abraham and Moses. They were invented in the part of the world where the Israelites lived. They wrote on stone, clay, pottery, wood, metal, leather and papyrus - but obviously only leather and papyrus were suitable for scrolls. An average scroll contained about 20 pages of papyrus sheets stuck together. The scroll would be about 15 feet long and one foot tall. 'Books' weren't invented until much later so all the Old Testament was written on scrolls. Also bear in mind that it wasn't written in chapters and verses. The chapter headings are the work of Stephen Langton, who was Archbishop of Canterbury 1200 AD and the verse numbers were added in the 16th century.

Many of the books are put together by editors who combined various source materials - oral tradition, written records etc. So they do not have one specific named author. What we mean when we say the Bible is the inspired Word of God is not that God put the authors into a trance and they wrote automatically but something more creative than this. God and people together interact - The Holy Spirit works with people to produce the Bible God means us to have. Scripture is God-breathed.

READING THE OLD TESTAMENT

When we read the OT we remember it points forward to Jesus. But that doesn't mean we think it is only the passages which foretell Jesus that matter. When I was a child there was a tendency to read it purely typologically but it is important to see that the Old Testament records God's dealings with people in the centuries before Christ. It is Act 2 of human history, or better still of His Story.

It was the Bible of Jesus and the first Christians. Jesus learnt it by heart as a child, often quoted from it, even on the cross, and regarded it as authoritative. It reveals God, the Creator and ruler of human history. God is not a philosophical idea but a Personality who acts in history; the one who created humankind and gave us this beautiful world to live on,

INTRODUCTION TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

who called Abraham and introduced Himself by name to Moses - who reveals himself to people, even while we know that he is far beyond anything we can imagine. He upholds the universe and He cares for individuals. This is the Old Testament God we are going to study.

Also we need to bear in mind the teaching of the New Testament when we interpret it. We interpret it through the lens of the New Testament. BUT:

Having said that we must not conclude that the Old Testament is deficient in the revelation of God that it offers. ... We cannot afford to ignore or neglect what the Old Testament teaches us about God... It offered an authoritative revelation of God to Israel.

Old Testament Today: John Walton and Andrew Hill

Guidelines to studying passages of The Old Testament

We need to understand:

1. The **original context** of the passage.
2. The **content** of the passage. Includes asking ourselves what 'genre' the literature is.
3. The **meaning** of the passage for us today.

If we skip straight away to number 3 there is the danger that we can make the Bible say anything we want it to say!

The early books of the Old Testament can throw up some ethical dilemmas. This is perhaps most difficult when we consider God's command that the Israelites should annihilate the Canaanites - we would not endorse ethnic cleansing today. The theme of sacrifice dominates the Pentateuch - many of the rules of Leviticus are to do with it. Again this is not a familiar concept to Westerners, although it is still a feature of Islam and Hinduism. It is possible to say that the ethnic cleansing found in the book of Joshua was a one-off, driven by the unique need of Israel to be pure and separate. Also much of our understanding of Jesus' death depends on the concept of sacrifice taught in the OT.

It might also be helpful to consider the nature of God's revelation to us. Is there '**progressive revelation**' in the Old Testament? Maybe God is a realist who speaks to the world 'as it is' and works through people 'where they are' even though their understanding and moral development is limited by the constraints of their day. **The Old Testament covers a span of about 1,700 years. Life looked a lot different at the end of that time than the beginning.** So, for example:

The Bible often speaks of the heart as the centre of intelligence and the organ of thought. The function of the brain was unknown in the ancient world, and rather than redress their physiological ignorance, God felt free to speak of the heart as the organ of thought. As modern readers with better knowledge of physiology we are not obligated to believe that we think with our hearts.

Old Testament Today: Walton and Hill

So maybe the eighth century prophet Isaiah had a more mature understanding of God than some of the thirteenth century Judges? Or to take a more specific example: By the time of Ezra and Nehemiah towards the end of the Old Testament era the assumption is made that marriage is monogamous, one man and one woman. However in earlier times no moral judgement is expressed over the fact that David, described as *'a man after God's own heart'* had several wives and concubines. Or again, animal sacrifice dominated the worship of the Old Testament and yet there are hints in the book of Psalms and the prophetic writings that there is a higher way to meet with God. *'You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it: You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken and contrite heart'* (Psalm 51:16-17). *'With what shall I come before the Lord? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? He has shown you people what is good, and what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.'*

Does this reflect a more mature understanding of God and what he requires of us? Does the Old Testament contradict itself or is it a developing and maturing literature? Does this help us to come to terms with some of the militaristic aspects of early Israelite history, such as the insistence that all the Canaanites be wiped out? Today we would be appalled by such wholesale ethnic cleansing.

Maybe the way out of the mess which humans then and now create is also messy. It is not possible to 'wave a magic wand' and make everything instantly all right. Salvation history is a process.

Also maybe it should encourage us to realise that the Old Testament shows us God's choosing of people who didn't always meekly obey Him, but who in the course of their walk with him messed up - Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Jonah. Their stories aren't neat and tidy but they are all marked out as people with whom God entered relationship.

Philip Yancey, in his book *'The Bible Jesus Read'*, develops the same argument. He points out that the Old Testament is realistic, portraying the world as it was, with no holds barred:

In its pages you will find passionate stories of love and hate, blood-chilling stories of rape and dismemberment... Nothing is neat and orderly. Spoilt brats like Solomon and Samson get supernatural gifts; a truly good man like Job gets catastrophe. As you encounter these disturbances, you may recoil against them or turn away from a god who had any part in them. The wonderful quality of the Old Testament is that it contains those responses as well! God anticipates our objections and includes them in his sacred writing.

He goes on to argue that within the realism we can detect:

... a gradual but certain movement towards grace. The Hebrews lived in wild barbaric times. Their laws, which seem harsh to us, represent a great softening compared to their neighbours' laws. They established basic rules of warfare and

INTRODUCTION TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

enshrined in their laws respect for the poor and care for the environment... We must remember, as we look back on a time of blood-vengeance, slavery, polygamy that God had to work with people's moral condition at a given stage... He gradually edged his people towards a different way... In zigzag fashion the long vectors of history pointed steadily toward his Son Jesus.

The opening 'act' of the OT describes the mess mankind got the world into. Maybe sometimes the way out of the mess is messy. There are now painless solutions to humankind's dilemma.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Genesis 12, the **Call of Abraham**, is the **beginning of the history of the Jews**. It is also the beginning of salvation history. Genesis 1-II records how God, having created the world, made a beautiful garden for Adam and Eve to live in, in perfect communion with him. But sin came into the world and these chapters show how this snowballed until human kind was in a desperate plight. The call of Abraham is the beginning of God's rescue plan.

We are therefore going back in time 4,000 years, to around the dawning of Western civilization, to the Middle Bronze Age. One of the main centres of this fledgling civilization was to be found in Mesopotamia – the land between the 2 rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. The fertile plain created by these rivers was the home of the ancient Babylonian Empire. (Today it is the region of Iraq.) The other centre of civilization was found in Ancient Egypt- again because of a mighty river – the Nile. The annual flooding from this river created a fertile basin which was a natural choice for people to begin developing cities to live in. Civilization – people moving on from being hunter nomads, scavenging for food, to settle in communities, learning to live together, build homes, to grow crops – essential for a change from being a nomadic to a settled community, and the development of early farming methods.

Over time this led to the building of cities – although please don't picture anything as large as London, Liverpool or Birmingham – obviously the population was tiny in comparison.

As various centres of the population grew up so there was the beginning of trade between them. The key to trade in the Middle East was the fertile crescent.. Traders could travel up from Ethiopia in Africa to Egypt, then further north to the ports like Tyre, from where they could sail to anywhere in the Mediterranean, or they could continue travelling round the fertile crescent to Mesopotamia. So Israel is at the crossroads of continents – what today we call Africa, Asia and South East Europe. And not just for trade but for armies too (and their supply routes.)

Also important in the growth of civilization is the development of writing. The first form of writing resembles the hieroglyphics such as found on pyramids in Egypt. This was unwieldy and the preserve of the elite. The development of alphabets made writing more widespread and a part of everyday life. The development was driven by the need to record goods when

trading, billing people etc. and also the preservation of records. But this moves us on beyond the time of Abraham.

Also as we will see as we study the next 2,000 years through the eyes of the Old Testament, inevitably these cities looked to spread their power and influence over an ever widening area as they built up empires. Much of the history of the Old Testament is played out against the power struggle between Egypt and first of all Babylonia, then the Assyrians, based at Nineveh who defeated and took over the Babylonians. The Assyrians were defeated by a resurgent Babylonia, who were then defeated by the Medes and Persians, before the eventual emergence of the Greek Empire – Alexander the Great in the 4th century.

Don't worry about remembering these – we'll come across them in detail as we go through this course. The thing to notice is this: they are part of the Old Testament story, and they are historical. The Old Testament isn't some kind of make believe book – it refers to a real time in history, you can visit these ancient empires in the British Museum. The Old Testament characters inhabit a real world.

However the books we have are not concerned with writing up history for the sake of writing up history. They draw on existing historical documents and annals of kings but they choose their material to make a theological point. So for example, we know from sources outside the Bible that Omri was one of the most powerful and successful of Israel's Kings – have you ever heard of him?

© Jenny Heinink 2012

RECOMMENDED READING

The Bible Jesus Read Philip Yancey

Old testament Today John H Walton and Andrew E Hill (pub. Zondervan)

The series *Exploring the Old Testament* Vol 1: *The Pentateuch*
Vol 2: *The Histories*
Vol 3: *The Psalms and Wisdom Literature*
Vol 4: *The Prophets* (pub. SPCK)

NOTES